

Uncle Sam's dies give Abe an overhaul

By Roger Boye

Government engravers have refined the design on some 1982-dated cent dies, sharpening the details in Abraham Lincoln's beard, cheekbone and vest.

Coins made from the revamped dies began turning up in circulation last month, judging from reports of Chicago-area collectors. Besides subtle changes in Lincoln's portrait, the new look includes clearer letters and numerals on the heads side.

Bureaucrats modified the obverse design to double the number of copper-coated zinc cents that can be made from each die, said Alan Herbert in an analysis written for Numismatic News. With the revision, workers also can lower the striking pressure, reducing wear on equipment, Herbert added.

Experts predict that neither type of 1982 zinc cent—the traditional design nor the restyled variety—will become a collector's item because Uncle Sam will make billions of each.

Meanwhile, machines at the Philadelphia Mint are churning out their last 1982-dated cents produced with a mixture of 95 percent copper and 5 percent zinc. By year's end, all four government coinage factories will be making zinc cents exclusively.

The San Francisco and West, Point, N.Y., offices converted to zinc-cent production several months ago, and the Denver Mint changed in October. Except for the 1943 "steel pennies," copper had been the primary metal used in all cents since the federal government began making them in 1793.

Thanks to the copper plating, zinc cents look like their copper cousins, but the zinc coin weighs about 20 percent less.

● Several noontime strollers in New Orleans became instant coin hounds a few weeks ago after construction workers unearthed crates filled with at least 1,000 rarities.

"Visualize, if you will, businessmen in Brooks Brothers suits, women executives dressed in high heels and stockings, and laborers in work clothes all on their hands and knees, in mud at times up to their waists, digging with their bare hands for buried treasure," wrote New Orleans coin dealer James H. Cohen.

Many of the people who found keepsakes took them to Cohen's shop for appraisal. In an article he wrote for the hobby newspaper *Coin World*, Cohen reported that coin dates ranged from 1754 to 1842, with foreign coins outnumbering U.S. pieces.

Later in the afternoon police blocked off the site and workers continued to dig the hole for the foundation of a new hotel. The construction company has since poured concrete into the hole, "making the balance of the coins forever inaccessible," Cohen said.

Most likely, bankers had buried the coins before or during the Civil War for safekeeping.